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ABSTRACT

Public distrust in schools should not be attributed to poorer schools or less able students; it exists because we have a different kind of parent and a different world ahead. Parents of today's children were trained not to accept the status quo, but to question; furthermore, underlying parents' concern about the schools is a fear that their children will not have a better life than they did. Parents want to be informed of school goals, evidence for their attainment, and action plans for unsuccessful areas. Parents should be sent all test scores and play an active role in report card design and format. Citizens of the school district are entitled to a year end progress report which would list and evaluate accomplishment of the year's goals and suggest goals for the following year. The report world include test score results, score comparisons beyond the school district, and a follow-up study of recent graduates. Before implementing minimal competency testing as a means to accountability, some caution is necessary. Are such tests valid measures of basic skills? How will they affect students who score below or far above the minimum? Most importantly, does mastery of basic skills ensure a productive job that will provide security, status, happiness, and fulfillment? (Author/CP)

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REMARKS: "WHAT PARENTS OUGHT TO KNOW/BE TOLD ABOUT OUR SCHOOLS"
MICHIGAN SCHOOL TESTING CONFERENCE
FEBRUARY 22, 1978
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The subject we are dealing with this morning doesn't have a whole lot of humor connected with it so we might have to work a little bit harder to find some this morning. I am really here somewhat under false pretenses, but I did stick with my commitment. When Frank asked me if I would be willing to be a part of this session, I understood the topic to be "What would you like to tell the public?" - and, after being in the role of Superintendent for several years now, believe me, I had a lot to say - I even know where some of them ought to go. When I found out the real topic, I found a greater challenge.

I don't want to be like one superintendent friend I knew who went to a convention out of town and took with him three of the other members of his administrative staff. Naturally, they had two rooms so one of the three had to room with the superintendent. The next morning when that particular fellow came down to breakfast with the other two, he looked all red eyed and completely worn out. The other two asked him what happened and he said, "Have you ever slept with the superintendent - he tosses and turns and snores and talks in his sleep all night. I don't think I can take another night of that." One of the other two said, "O,k., I will room with the superintendent tonight." The first fellow was really appreciative and said, "Great." The next morning the two administrators who roomed together were sitting at the breakfast table and the third fellow came down looking as fresh as a daisy and was feeling great. A little while later they saw the superintendent come down the stairway all blurry-eyed, hair messed up, completely worn out. They asked the guy who roomed with him, "How did you do it?" He said, "Well, I got ready for bed, showered, shaved, shaving lotion, talcum powder all over me. Then I walked over and kissed the superintendent on the forehead and then went onto my bed and went to sleep. He stayed awake all night wondering what would be happening next." I found that to be very true, and I often find myself wondering what will be happening next. If ever there was the time when I was wondering it more, it seems it would be right now. With this back to basics movement, and the push toward minimal competencies which obviously requires a significantly greater amount of testing, I think we better be wondering what will be happening next.

What should the public be told about our schools? I have to begin looking back for a moment before I can look forward. How did we get ourselves into this mess? Years ago, the public apparently didn't have to be told anything about the schools. It appears that the teacher or headmaster was the boss and the expert when it came to education. I began school several years ago in a one room country school house and one lady taught about twenty five children from eight different grades and kindergarten. I don't remember that there were such things as parent/teacher conferences. I know that when the report card went home, I was the one who got into trouble for the poor grade on the card, not the teacher. There was a school board of a type. I remember there were three people on that board and my dad was one of those members for awhile. They spent their time securing a teacher and buying enough coal to keep the school house warm, but to my knowledge, they never even discussed what they ought to tell the teacher or what the school ought to tell them.

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I am not suggesting by mentioning that part of my past, that that is the way it should be. It simply makes me raise the question of why is it different today? Why does the public seem to want to know so much more about their schools? Why do they feel so much more need to be "involved" in working with and, indeed, advising or even running parts of the school operation? Are teachers and administrators less competent? Are kids more important today? Are schools poorer or worse? Or, is the public more inquisitive, more knowledgable and less trusting? Try as you will, I don't think I will ever be convinced that the schools are poorer today. Schools are better and kids are smarter than they ever have been. More is being taught, more subject areas are available than ever before, and students are learning more than ever before in our history. What then is the problem?

I believe we have a very different situation - we have a <u>different kind of parent</u> and a <u>different world ahead</u> - different from any point of time in history. Watergate, thank goodness, is now behind us - but oh what a price we paid. Those of us in public and governmental leadership positions will have to work long hours and many years to regain the trust that was lost, not solely because of Watergate, but clearly amplified because of Watergate. The young people that we taught back when I was beginning - and that is not nearly so long ago as some of you are thinking - are now, to my complete shock and amazement, already parents of children now going to our schools. It is hard to believe. In fact, I had an opportunity two weeks ago to spend a very enjoyable time in the northern part of the state, snowmobiling and skiing with relatives and their friends from Indiana. That is, it was enjoyable until the time when one of the not so young guests from Indiana, when introduced to me said, "You are not "Mr. Oxender, are you?" I should have gotten the clue right then to shut up, but I went on to say, "Perhaps," and she then identified me as a teacher she had in junior high school. She had the time and the place right, but I will be darned if I would admit it. But these are the same people who are asking these difficult questions - they are the people who literally demand to be told about their schools. They are not completely trusting that we educators are doing the exact right things we ought to be doing in the schools. <u>I guess they want some proof</u>.

Let me say something more about these parents of today's kids. I worked hard years ago trying to teach what I called sort of an inquiry method. I tried to teach those young people not to accept the status quo, but to question. We tried to teach those young people that they can do something to make their world better; that they should be involved; they should ask questions; they should not accept things at face value; they should ask for proof. Is it any wonder then that they are asking these unusual questions about their schools?

Why do they distrust? Why are they worried that the schools are not teaching the basics? Why do they think we have too many choices for kids? In short, why do they think we should crack down? Again, let's look back. Many of the children today are from parents who went to school in the 60's. The 60's were unusual times in our world, and certainly in our schools. The students, in the colleges and high schools, particularly, decided that they wanted a relevant education - "only if it is for real, man." "Hey, man, I would like to make some choices - I know what's good for me - let me do my own thing." They weren't at all sure that they needed foreign language. Why did they have to be in arithmetic or advanced algebra - how did it fit into life? Who needed it? "I really don't need to know how to spell - I am going to have a secretary." "I don't need to know how to do math, man. I am going to have a computer on my wrist." And the story goes on.

In short, maybe we educators messed up our schools a little bit in the 60's, but we sure as hell had help. The help came from those people who are now parents of the kids in our schools. Is it any wonder that they are a bit worried? In fact, I am certain that a number of them think our schools are just like they were back in 1968 with students sitting in the hallway protesting some problem. I really don't think they are aware of the seriousness with which most of our young people today face their education.

There's a second point. As I think about myself as a parent of high school and college age young people, and as I visit with the many parents in our school district and other schools as well, I am convinced that there is a real underlying question actually based on a fear, that really outplays all of the other concerns being expressed. That question is this: Will my son or my daughter really be able to get a job, and make as good or better a living, and have a happier and better life than I did as their parent? It seems to me that always before in our world, parents were reasonably confident that their son or daughter would be able to have it better than they did. We seem to be reaching a point with a little higher population, a worried economy, and an oversupplied job market for even college educated people, that maybe our kids won't necessarily have it better than we did. For the energetic parent who frequently has made his or her way through intelligence, honesty, and hard work, it is a frightening piece of reality that maybe my kid won't be able to find a job or won't have the security and pleasures in life that I have had.

I admit that some of that is speculation, but I suspect that collectively, many of those ideas contribute to the decision conference planners made in placing this item on the agenda.

Our public, parents, citizens, senior citizens, and young people should be told everything they want to know about the schools. I really don't see anything we ought to be holding back. The method by which we tell them is super difficult and that is at least in part their own fault. Citizens sometimes make it nearly impossible to be communicated with. They don't want to come to meetings: they only partially read newsletters, or newspapers, and frequently cannot take the time to inquire or ask personally. While process isn't our topic today, believe me, I have much more problem finding an effective process of communicating with our public, than I have of determining what they should know or hear.

To help me do a better job today and to insure that I might be on the right track, I asked one of the strong, involved - and yes, opinionated, parents in our area what she thought should be the answer to our question today. The interview went something like this: (Play the tape).

Put in one word, that sounds to me like accountability. This parent wants to know:

a. Goals - what we are trying to do?
b. Evidence - proof at year end what we have done.
c. Action plan for each unsuccessful area,

and, she suggests the development and checking of minimum skill competencies. Where have we heard that before?

Let me be a little bit more specific about things parents can know. I think their student report card is really for them, so I think they should be significantly involved in its design and format. If they want letter grades, I think they should have them. If they don't want letter grades, I think they should

have adequate anecdotal comments from the teachers to serve that purpose, as well. They will have to get through their head that we might have a little extra information on that report form that they might not be interested in. Also, if they make the report form too time consuming for our teaching staff, we may have to take a few half days off school in order to complete the records. All test scores should be sent to the parents. The newspaper can have all it wants as well. The basic curriculum of the school district should be in writing and available to parents. The general part of that should be amended only by the Board of Education, and in a public meeting; therefore, of total knowledge to parents.

What I would really like to see done - and I am working in that direction - but not there yet - is the preparation of a thorough year end report done annually as a report to the citizens of each school district in the state. That report would include several of the following items:

a. a list of the priorities and key objectives for the year
b. an evaluation of the accomplishment of each of the key objectives or goals for the year
c. a report of student progress by way of test scores
d. results of a follow-up study of recent graduates
e. changes in curriculum and requirements made during the year, and contemplated changes for the future
f. comparison of school district results with some other factor, perhaps state scores
g. identification and listing of program shortcomings or weak points, and a plan of action for improvement of each item listed
h. set of key goals, objectives or priorities suggested for the following year

The identification of the key priorities or objectives is one of the very important parts of this task. It is important that all elements of the school community - parents, students, teachers, administrators, the Board of Education cooperatively work on identifying these. Another important element is the evaluation plan necessarily would need to include some outside monitoring or auditing in order to provide credibility to the report.

There is no question that what I am suggesting is a move toward greater accountability. It goes along with many people's thoughts on the subject of testing for student competency in basic skills. Our district is toying with the idea of identifying basic skill competencies in the communications and computation areas that should be mastered prior to leaving the elementary, another set prior to leaving middle school, and another set prior to leaving high school. Obviously, once identified, these would be then tested and students not being successful would have to have remedial help. People are suggesting retention, summer school, or denial of a choice of electives, or even a diploma, for those students who have not met the minimum competencies. I am not certain, but in our case I believe the majority of the teaching staff and the majority of the parents and perhaps even a majority of the kids at this time, would like to move in this direction.

A few cautions or worries that probably plague all of us who have been thinking very seriously about how in the world we can insure a minimum reading level or writing level or computing level for every single kid before he or she leaves our schools: 1) are we confident that, indeed, each person must know how to read that well, or write or compute that well in order to survive the

adult world, to have a job, to be reasonably happy, to be, indeed, a productive member of society? Or would it be possible for some people to be happy and successful in their own way without some of those minimal skills? Before you say "no" to that, look around you and remember that there are many, many people out there now without those skills. You might say that they are not successful or they are not happy or they are not productive, but in some cases, you won't convince them of that.

2) Are our tests good enough to measure those skills accurately? Who is going to draw the line - who is going to decide what is pass and fail? Every single person here who teaches, or was once a teacher and responsible for evaluating student work knows how very difficult it is to draw that line between pass and fail. Can you imagine how much more difficult it would be if the line you were drawing were to cause a student to be retained, or promoted from a given grade, or even more importantly, to grant or deny a high school diploma to the young citizen?

3) With this action, are we possibly placing the burden of not learning too heavily on the student himself, or herself, and not sufficiently on the schools and, yes, also on the parent? Are we certain that every child can, indeed, overcome his or her inabilities and even disabilities, and learn at the now famous minimal level? And, my own worry is, what in the world will we do with those who just cannot make it? (Because I am convinced that there will be some.)

4) Drop-outs. We have worked long and hard to convince everyone in our country that education and graduating from high school is a very valuable and, indeed, necessary event in life - are we prepared now to deal with those for whom the diploma simply becomes unobtainable? Will the required placement in additional remedial classes, and possibly repetitious teaching and learning, cause more kids to simply throw in the sponge and say, "I quit?" Will the benefits gained by the increased learning level for some students, be more than offset by the defeatism and failure felt by those who have thrown in the sponge?

5) We have all known for some time that acceptance of self, and confidence in self, is an important factor in student learning and achievement - is it possible that these minimum competencies and lines that we feel we must draw for success (and necessarily failure) will negatively affect that important item and thereby defeat what we are trying to accomplish?

6) Another haunting worry - will this significant concentration on minimal learnings and minimal objectives, lower the expectations and learning level for the hundreds of thousands of young people who far exceed those levels and achieve above average to superior in all subject areas in all schools?

Perhaps I am too negative. But, I do remind you of the real question that I mentioned earlier and caution all of us - that while we are going into this issue of required minimum competencies, we better be certain that we are contributing to the answer of that question or we will have bedlam on our hands. Will accomplishment of minimum objectives (by 75 or 90 or even 100 percent of our young people) <u>insure</u> them of a <u>productive</u> job in the future, that will provide them <u>security</u>, <u>status</u>, <u>happiness</u>, and <u>fulfillment in life</u> at a level equal to or better than their parents? Or, even after all of that, will we continue to have the fear in our minds of unemployment, unhappiness, and possible lack of

success in the adult world?

Education seems to have to operate on a pendulum and maybe some of you are like me - I think I have been hit on the head twice by the same pendulum, once from each side. Speaking as one educator, I hope those blows have caused me to become smarter. I hope I only swing part way with the pendulum this time. We can't afford to continually take education all the way in one direction and all the way back; we will have mixed up kids if we are not careful.

Where I am now -

We should - we must - teach for mastery, and
publicly define what students are to learn
teach them
measure - test - what they have mastered
inform them/parents when they haven't made it. In fact, all can be informed.
(let's confess)
set up a three way contract, a written plan of action to remedy
stay at it until you master
or, finally parent and student can sign off a waiver of liability for the schools -

Thank you.